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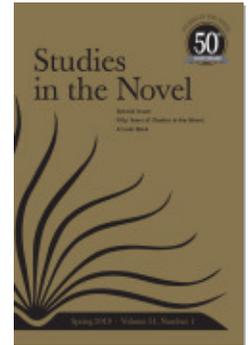
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CORMAC MCCARTHY FOR THE AGES

TIMOTHY PARRISH

Introducing Lydia R. Cooper’s “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative,” first published in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 43, No. 2, summer 2011, pp. 218-36.

To understand the beauty and importance of Lydia Cooper’s reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, we first must accept that this novel, like McCarthy’s works generally, resists interpretation. The experience of being in the novel is visceral, primal, perhaps beyond meaning. It portrays a future where history, which necessarily includes the reader, has no referent. Even the sun has been hidden beyond the dark dismal dust that has consumed most of the planet’s life. The novel’s eerie atmosphere, where humans wander lost and murderous in a landscape that is the remains of our contemporary reality, may seem like a dreadful mirror of our imminent future.

Its plot concerns a father and son walking a road through a blasted landscape toward an unforeseeable, unimaginable future. They stumble through the detritus of the reader’s world—a Coke can, a Texaco map, a soggy library preserving moldering books that no one will ever read again. The father dies and the son lives, but human civilization has been annihilated. The novel presents no knowable future beyond the next step the character takes, the next page the reader turns. Yet, of the countless novels I have taught in more than twenty years of university teaching, *The Road* is the one students like best.

Their excitement is not because they see it as a warning from scientists or political theorists about melting arctic ice caps or ubiquitous nuclear weapons. Cooper yields to this impulse when, drawing on Baudrillard’s critique of the West, she suggests that after 9/11 “worlds burning and turning to ash” reflect the “American public’s fear that the pursuit of political, global ascendancy is in itself an act of violence whose backlash will be both staggering in its magnitude and inexorable in its execution” (222). Change the course of American history and the world will be saved. If only it were so.

By destroying the reader's existing world, *The Road* instead transforms such interpretations into a failed utopic reasoning. "American" is at best an incidental term, no more meaningful than "medieval" or "dinosaur" to the book's story. *The Road*'s scope is vaster than any single event or ideological stance can imply. It is a post-creation novel in which there never was a Garden of Eden. The novel's premise requires that the reader consent to the proposition that *The Road* has become the only world the reader can know. Thus, students need not have read deeply in Melville or Nietzsche or Homer, as McCarthy has, to be struck by the novel's intense immediacy. Its world, in other words, is very much come-as-you-are.

Yet, the interpretative position of *The Road* in relation to the world it portrays is equivocal. Throughout, the father attempts to communicate to his son the "values" of "the old stories." But what good are they? If libraries have become pulp, what authority does any narrative about this world possess? This question forms the constitutive dilemma of *The Road*. The ultimate answer Cooper gives is not historical or ideological, but literary. An early title for the novel, she notes, was "The Grail," and she reads the book according to the logic of this title that McCarthy ultimately rejected.

From the legend of King Arthur to T. S. Eliot, grail stories involve infected kingdoms that require moral renewal. However, unlike *The Waste Land*, *The Road* is not identifying or lamenting the sterility of modern existence. It is no mere plot device that the boy's mother killed herself rather than confront the consequences of living on, or that the hidden sun is described as a "grieving mother with a lamp" (28). For McCarthy, the so-called sterility of existence is embedded within the very fact of being. For *The Road* to have meaning beyond the recognition of an inevitable, cyclical doom, it must imagine a truth that exists beyond the observable facts of human history. Cooper's essay brilliantly shows how reading *The Road* as a grail narrative achieves this end. The essential idea is not that *The Road* tells a story of one who seeks and finds the grail, as Perceval did, but that the boy himself is the grail. To carry the fire is, as his father suggests, his mission. However, the fire he carries is himself. Cooper attributes the boy's survival to an innate compassion that exists despite the hard world he encounters, and this is undoubtedly right.

I need not recount Cooper's logic here—the essay does it beautifully—but I do wish to make an appeal for why this grail reading helps us to understand both McCarthy's achievement and why this book speaks so powerfully to ordinary readers in ways that most novels discussed in this journal's pages do not. *The Grail* became *The Road* because McCarthy's book reveals no tangible grail, no authentic cup from which Christ drank or which held his blood. Its "grail," as Cooper suggests, is literally the boy walking the road. His compassion reflects or continues the blocked light that the "grieving mother" (sun) radiates beyond the prevailing darkness of this world. Believe in the story of the boy and *The Road* itself becomes the reader's grail. My students identify

with the boy because he was born after the apocalypse and is not “infected” with the solutions that tried and failed to prevent it.

Cooper’s essay suggests that readers respond so keenly to McCarthy’s novel because as they read it they discover a living grail in their hands. To read *The Road* is to experience the grail (compassion, mercy) as something more sustaining than climate change. By entering into its story of the boy-seeker, they intuit that they can survive whatever dreadful scenario history has been preparing for them since the Garden of Eden and the Big Bang. This respite which may be more than a respite exists for as long as they live in the book—even in a world where books have been lost. Literature, not science or history, may provide such consolation, such ecstasy.

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